

## Chapter Nine

JOHN WAS WRONG.

They did not get to the haymeadow the next day at noon. It was closer to seven, almost dark, when they finally pulled into the west end of the meadow.

It was more than a meadow. More than just hay. It was a wide, shallow valley between two rows of peaks. The haymeadow itself was four sections, but the whole valley was close to four miles across and nearly eight miles long and so beautiful, John thought, that it almost took his breath away.

And it was a complete surprise. In the middle a stream moved down through the whole length of the canyon. It ran nearly straight and here and there a stand of aspens grew along the edge. The stream left the valley

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through a narrow cut between two hills—small mountains, really—and then worked its way down into the prairies ten and more miles below.

It was impossible to see the valley, to know that it was there until passing through the cut between the hills and it must have been a shock the first time the old man had seen it.

It was a perfect summer pasture. The evening cool kept the flies from being a problem for the stock, and the water and daylight sun kept the grass growing so that it came to John's knees when he walked.

"Something, ain't it?" Cawley said as they followed the sheep through the entry between the hills. "Sure wished I owned it. . . ."

We did, John thought. The Barrons did own it. And lost it.

Most of the sheep knew where they were, knew that the drive was done, and they spread out and started to eat.

"Got to push them a bit more," Cawley said, popping his rope at the rear of the herd. "Get these ones in the rear up into the good grass and near water. If they don't get to water some of them won't make it."

They had come all day without water and John knew that sheep had a way of dying with little or no reason.

The dogs also knew where they were but sensed Cawley's urgency and ripped into the trailing end of the herd

with a vengeance, snapping and barking and spitting wool until all of them, even the lambs, were up in good grass and had easy access to the stream.

Every year they pulled the wagon approximately up to the center of the valley where a small patch of aspens provided a windbreak and some shade. It was where Tink liked to be and John decided he might as well do the same.

It took him almost an hour more to get there and by then it was totally dark. Cawley lighted the lantern and hung it from the wagon and they began to unload in the dark. The wagon had a small set of stairs—two steps—and the third time Cawley hung a foot in a step and tripped coming down in the dark he swore and they decided to wait until daylight to finish setting up the camp.

“Before I break my neck,” he said.

So they made the bedrolls and tarp ready, set up dog food and water, heated up two cans of stew and ate and went to bed and asleep without saying ten more words.

There was something, John thought just before sleep took him—something about the valley that kept you from saying much and made you talk quietly when you did talk.

John opened his eyes.

The smell of coffee made his mouth water. He hated

coffee but loved the smell of it brewing and he sat up to see Cawley up, dressed and with a fire going.

“I’ve got to bust out,” Cawley said. “I can make it in a long day and a short one if I keep moving. I thought you needed sleep so I let you be. You did some rambling about that girl in the car and I thought maybe you wanted to dream a little more. . . .”

“I did not.”

Cawley smiled. “Well, you don’t really know, do you?”

He rolled his bedroll into a tube and tied it, stood. In the background John saw that the big red was already saddled and waiting patiently.

Cawley stopped, looked once more down at John. “Any questions?”

“I . . .”

He was going to say a hundred things. I don’t know anything. I don’t think I can do this. I can’t, I can’t . . . it isn’t fair to leave me here alone. I don’t know what I’m doing—and in the end that’s what came out. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Cawley laughed. “Well, hell, none of us do, do we?”

“But I mean it. It’s not a joke. I’ll try this ’cause Pa said to try it but I don’t, Cawley—I don’t know what to do.”

Cawley nodded. “I understand—but the dogs and sheep will tell you how it’s done. You know what they

used to say, back when the old man was running the spread?"

John shook his head.

"Keep a horse to hand."

He turned and walked to the red, tied his bedroll across in back of the saddle, swung up and mounted, and set off at a pacing walk without looking back or waving or saying another word.

And John sat in his sleeping bag and watched him leave, watched him ride until he was a small dot at the end of the valley, a dot that disappeared in the cut between the hills. John watched even when he was gone, watched the place between the hills and found himself wishing, hoping, praying that everything would reverse and a dot would reappear and grow larger and it would be Cawley coming back to tell him it was a joke.

But it did not. The dot stayed gone and John flopped back in the bag and looked up at the underside of the tarp.

I am the only person in the valley, he thought, and then he said it aloud. "I am the only person here."

It just didn't seem possible that his pa would drop him up here with six thousand sheep for the summer. Not like this. Not alone.

He started to feel sorry for himself, then remembered the old man. Four, five years older than John and he claimed the whole place—alone.

John pulled his boots on and rolled his bedroll. It was high morning and he had a lot of work to do—unload the wagon, get camp squared away, get settled for the first night alone with the herd.

But the coffee on the fire still smelled good. He stopped work for a moment and poured some in the tin cup he'd used for drinking water and took a sip, hoping that he would like it. It tasted bitter and he spit it out and turned back to the bedroll.

Just as he finished rolling the bedroll and was reaching for the tie cord to tie it he heard one of the dogs barking and the bleating of sheep and over it all the high-pitched rattle of a snake, almost a buzz-hissing sound.

He dropped everything and ran for the horses.